

Teachers as Coaches Through Peer Observation

I learned a powerful lesson in leadership when I was appointed to take over a school that was on the brink of turnaround status. I spent the first year making every last decision. I did not trust my staff and I micromanaged everything and everyone. After all, my staff were the same teachers who had been there the previous years as student achievement declined. Surely it must have been the staff's fault, right? Wrong.

The second year I was there I realized that not only did I not know everything, but that I could not do everything either. I had to let go of the reins and get help from my staff. Peer observation was our solution.

Set-up

Peer observation offers job-embedded, ongoing professional development through practice, reflection, and feedback. As Douglas B. Reeves wrote in *Leading Change in Your School*, "With an emphasis on internal capacity, the leadership of professional development efforts comes from the faculty itself, and a large part of the professional education takes place in the classroom with the teachers engaged in authentic teaching."

Peer observations work well with any implemented initiative. We decided that our focus would be the Gradual Release of Responsibility Instruction Model. We have also used this process while implementing second language acquisition instructional strategies, higher-order thinking for the Common Core State Standards, and a 1:1 technology rollout.

This is how the process works: I have a leadership team made up of four master teachers. Each of these teachers agreed to lead a team of eight in a formal peer observation process. Every two weeks, one member of each team is observed by the other team members. The team members visit the teacher's classroom at

all different periods, unannounced, which produces an authentic picture of the teacher's instruction. The teams then meet and give feedback to their peers every other week.

This process costs nothing but time, which the principal needs to provide to staff so they can meet regularly. My teachers used one of their planning periods every two weeks for observations. Because peer observations are meant to be supportive and non-evaluative, I was not privy to any of the conversations. This is an important rule that all participants should be aware of—that the principal is not directly involved in the process.

Feedback

One challenge was that staff had to learn how to give constructive feedback to one another. We knew that if we weren't honest, the process would be a waste of time. Thus, each team was given lead sentence starters to begin the conversations. Also, the teachers being observed were encouraged to ask for specific needs in terms of feedback. We created focused checklists that not only guided our observations, but our discussions as well.

After instituting peer observation, teachers now feel supported. Conversations are about instruction and best practices and teachers no longer work in isolation. Teachers now feel like they have not just one colleague, but an entire team to solve problems and plan lessons with. Morale has soared

and so has student achievement.

Was everyone comfortable with this process? No, not at all. Teachers were more nervous in front of their peers than they were in front of me. "When I first learned about peer observation I felt nervous. Having my peers in my classroom observing me was an intimidating thought," said teacher Kendra Carpenter.


But as they completed their rotations and saw the benefits of both observing their peers and receiving constructive feedback from them, teachers became more at ease.

"As I observed my colleagues, I realized how much I enjoyed having the opportunity to see what they were doing," Carpenter noted.

Benefits

Teachers report that peer observations have given them the opportunity to reflect on their own practice and gain new ideas they can integrate in their classrooms. "We have elevated the level of our teaching through peer observation," said Carpenter. "I now feel that I have a safe place to share my doubts about my teaching without penalty. I know that my team will come in and give me honest, yet kind, feedback."

I learned that my staff had not been the problem. Each teacher had a strength to share, and together they became a think tank of creativity and innovation that has helped turn our school around. "We are not individual classrooms functioning on our own, but rather a group of professionals supporting each other toward a common goal: success for all of our students," added Carpenter.

Pride in the school is abundant, teacher turnover has become nonexistent, and after the first year our school won a state award for growth in student achievement. We have used this process for four years now and have won the state award for growth ever since. 

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